Sleep apnea is a serious [sleep](http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/default.htm) disorder that occurs when a person's breathing is interrupted during sleep. People with untreated sleep apnea stop breathing repeatedly during their sleep, sometimes hundreds of times. This means the brain -- and the rest of the body -- may not get enough oxygen.

Sleep apnea can affect anyone at any age, even children. Risk factors for sleep apnea include:

* Male gender
* Being overweight
* Being over the age of forty
* Having a large neck size (17 inches or greater in men and 16 inches or greater in women)
* Having large tonsils, a large tongue, or a small jaw bone
* Having a family history of sleep apnea
* Gastroesophageal reflux, or GERD
* Nasal obstruction due to a deviated septum, allergies, or sinus problems

What Are the Effects of Sleep Apnea?

If left untreated, sleep apnea can result in a growing number of health problems including:

* High blood pressure
* Stroke
* Heart failure, irregular heart beats, and heart attacks
* Diabetes
* Depression
* Worsening of ADHD

In addition, untreated sleep apnea may be responsible for poor performance in everyday activities, such as at work and school, motor vehicle crashes, as well as academic underachievement in children and adolescents.

[Insomnia](http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/guide/insomnia-symptoms-and-causes) is a [sleep](http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/default.htm) disorder that is characterized by difficulty falling and/or staying asleep. People with insomnia have one or more of the following symptoms:

* Difficulty falling asleep
* Waking up often during the night and having trouble going back to sleep
* Waking up too early in the morning
* Feeling tired upon waking

Types of Insomnia

There are two types of insomnia: primary insomnia and secondary insomnia.

* Primary insomnia: Primary insomnia means that a person is having sleep problems that are not directly associated with any other health condition or problem.
* Secondary insomnia: Secondary insomnia means that a person is having sleep problems because of something else, such as a health condition (like [asthma](http://www.webmd.com/asthma/default.htm), [depression](http://www.webmd.com/depression/old-toc1), [arthritis](http://arthritis.webmd.com/default.htm), [cancer](http://www.webmd.com/cancer/), or [heartburn](http://www.webmd.com/heartburn-gerd/default.htm)); [pain](http://www.webmd.com/pain-management/default.htm); medication they are taking; or a substance they are using (like alcohol).

Acute vs. Chronic Insomnia

Insomnia also varies in how long it lasts and how often it occurs. It can be short-term (acute insomnia) or can last a long time (chronic insomnia). It can also come and go, with periods of time when a person has no sleep problems. Acute insomnia can last from one night to a few weeks. Insomnia is called chronic when a person has insomnia at least three nights a week for a month or longer.

Causes of Insomnia

Causes of acute insomnia can include:

* Significant life [stress](http://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/) (job loss or change, death of a loved one, [divorce](http://children.webmd.com/kids-coping-divorce), moving).
* Illness.
* Emotional or physical discomfort.
* Environmental factors like noise, light, or extreme temperatures (hot or cold) that interfere with sleep.
* Some medications (for example those used to treat colds, [allergies](http://www.webmd.com/allergies/default.htm), depression, [high blood pressure](http://www.webmd.com/hypertension-high-blood-pressure/default.htm), and asthma) may interfere with sleep.
* Interferences in normal sleep schedule (jet lag or switching from a day to night shift, for example).

Causes of chronic insomnia include:

* Depression and/or [anxiety](http://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/default.htm).
* Chronic stress.
* Pain or discomfort at night.

Narcolepsy is a neurological disorder that affects the control of sleep and wakefulness. People with narcolepsy experience excessive daytime sleepiness and intermittent, uncontrollable episodes of falling asleep during the daytime. These sudden sleep attacks may occur during any type of activity at any time of the day.

In a [typical sleep cycle](http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/guide/sleep-101), we initially enter the early stages of sleep followed by deeper sleep stages and ultimately (after about 90 minutes) rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. For people suffering from narcolepsy, REM sleep occurs almost immediately in the sleep cycle as well as periodically during the waking hours. It is in REM sleep that we can experience dreams and muscle paralysis which explains some of the symptoms of narcolepsy.

Narcolepsy usually begins between the ages of 15 and 25, but it can become apparent at any age. In many cases, narcolepsy is undiagnosed and, therefore, untreated.

What Causes Narcolepsy?

The cause of narcolepsy is not known; however, scientists have made progress toward identifying genes strongly associated with the disorder. These genes control the production of chemicals in the brain that may signal sleep and awake cycles. Some experts think narcolepsy may be due to a deficiency in the production of a chemical called hypocretin by the brain. In addition, researchers have discovered abnormalities in various parts of the brain involved in regulating [REM sleep](http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/guide/sleep-101). These abnormalities apparently contribute to symptom development. According to experts, it is likely narcolepsy involves multiple factors that interact to cause neurological dysfunction and REM sleep disturbances.

What Are the Symptoms of Narcolepsy?

Symptoms of narcolepsy include:

* Excessive daytime sleepiness (EDS): In general, EDS interferes with normal activities on a daily basis, whether or not a person with narcolepsy has sufficient sleep at night. People with EDS report mental cloudiness, a lack of energy and concentration, memory lapses, a depressed mood, and/or extreme exhaustion.
* Cataplexy: This symptom consists of a sudden loss of muscle tone that leads to feelings of weakness and a loss of voluntary muscle control. It can cause symptoms ranging from slurred speech to total body collapse depending on the muscles involved and is often triggered by intense emotion, for example surprise, laughter, or anger.
* Hallucinations: Usually, these delusional experiences are vivid and frequently they are frightening. The content is primarily visual, but any of the other senses can be involved. These are called hypnagogic hallucinations when accompanying sleep onset and hypnopompic hallucinations when occurring during awakening.
* Sleep paralysis: This symptom involves the temporary inability to move or speak while falling asleep or waking up. These episodes are generally brief lasting a few seconds to several minutes. After episodes end, people rapidly recover their full capacity to move and speak.

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